



On Patrol

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News From the San Francisco Bay Area Freeway Service Patrol

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Latest Communications Upgrades Under Way

by Sze Lei Leong, MTC SAFE



Biswanath Halder, Beat 26 driver, using his in-vehicle mobile data computer

The Freeway Service Patrol (FSP) communications system that links tow operators and the California Highway Patrol (CHP) Golden Gate Dispatch Center serves two important purposes: It keeps drivers, dispatchers and CHP officers in the operations loop on a day-to-day basis, and it provides a way to measure the program's performance as a whole.

Accurate information about tow operator activities in the field is critical. This data is used to verify that existing FSP services are properly deployed, and to modify levels of service as necessary, so that the available funds are spent in the areas where they can do the most good.

To ensure that the flow of information serves its dual roles effectively, FSP staff is continuing to make improvements to the telecommunications network, building on significant

upgrades made in 2000. The new enhancements are expected to:

- increase the reliability of real-time data derived from the in-vehicle mobile data computers (MDCs);
- refine the kind of data collected via the MDCs to make it easier to measure the performance of tow operations;
- increase the capacity of the communications system to allow for future expansion in FSP service; and

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- simplify the process through which information is funneled through the telecommunications system.

The FSP has collected data from tow operators since the beginning of the program in 1992. In the years since then, there have been a series of changes in the data collection process. The overhaul in 2000 expanded the capability of the data system to cope with additional trucks, and replaced older wireless technologies with newer ones.

New Technology

This year, yet another technological leap is being made by migrating from the current wireless standard to the next generation of wireless standards. The switch is being made because

- the new standard offers an opportunity to greatly increase the reliability of data and to improve the data collection process;
- data capacity needs to be increased; and
- the cellular digital packet data (CDPD) format provided by AT&T via a Winstar frame relay has been discontinued.

The new standard — also to be provided by AT&T — is called “general packet radio service” (GPRS) and replaces the CDPD. Among its features are higher capacity, Internet-based content, and data transmission

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Communications Upgrades

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that relies on a packet-based format.

The FSP will be phasing in these improvements in two steps. First, Crystal Communications, the FSP's in-vehicle maintenance provider, will be visiting tow contractors' shops to modify the MDC software and install new GPRS modems. While this modification will not change basic MDC use and operation, drivers can expect to see data messaging speed up and the MDC system to function more smoothly. This phase is already under

way and scheduled to conclude in August 2004.

Once the objective of increasing data reliability has been achieved, the second phase will be launched, in which incident details will be entered directly into the MDCs instead of into the tow operators' daily shift



In-vehicle mobile data computer

records. Information collected will include the types of incidents encountered, when and where they occurred, and how and by whom the incident was handled.

The communications upgrades are expected to simplify the way essential information is conveyed between tow operators and the FSP partner agencies: the CHP, Caltrans and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission Service Authority for Freeways and Expressways. In this way, it will be possible to more accurately track how well the FSP is fulfilling its mandate to keep motorists safe and freeways free-flowing.

State Funding for FSP Is Falling Short

by Wes Wells, MTC SAFE

The state of California has been helping to fund Freeway Service Patrol (FSP) programs since 1992 — the year that the Bay Area and two other programs joined Los Angeles in launching their own tow truck patrols. By 2001, six other programs had been added, and the number of trucks, incidents handled and miles covered had all increased.

Roving FSP tow patrols have expanded from about 150 trucks in 1992 to more than 350 today. The number of freeway incidents cleared annually — from accidents to roadway debris — has increased from 150,000 to more than 650,000, and the miles of freeway patrolled by the FSP have lengthened from several hundred to over 1,500 currently.

As the program has grown, costs for providing service also have escalated. Due to rising wage rates, workers' compensation, fuel costs and insurance (to name a few of the major costs), bid prices to put a truck on the freeway have risen from \$35 per hour to over \$50 an hour. At the same time, as a result of the recent state budget shortfalls, Caltrans is cutting the number of

statewide support staff for the program from 15 to five. And the California Highway Patrol (CHP) — which has to commit officers to train and supervise FSP drivers, and dispatchers to monitor the patrolling tow trucks — has been held to a flat \$3.2 million allocation from Caltrans for the past three years. As a consequence, the CHP has had to cut 19 percent of its support personnel for the FSP since May 2003. Local agencies that administer FSP programs are, in the meantime, also struggling to balance their budgets.

Future funding from the state for individual FSP programs could decline further if a bill recently introduced in the state Assembly passes. Assembly Bill 2498 would make programs previously restricted from receiving state FSP allocations eligible for such monies, and thereby reduce the share of the total that each of the existing 10 programs can expect.

In fiscal year 2003-04, the 10 FSP programs around the state, combined, were allocated a total of \$18.1 million. Of this amount, Los Angeles received the largest share, at 35 percent; roughly 27 percent or \$4.9 million came to the Bay Area; and Orange and San Diego counties each garnered 11 percent of the total. These four programs represent 84 percent of the statewide allocation, with the remaining 16 percent

going to the six smaller programs: Riverside, Sacramento, Fresno, San Joaquin, Monterey and Santa Cruz.

Unless funding from the state increases or additional revenues are found, reductions in FSP service will have to be made. This is particularly disturbing in the face of the proven cost-effectiveness of the FSP program. Both the Los Angeles and Bay Area programs have averaged benefit-to-cost ratios in excess of 10 to one. The Partners for Advanced Transit and Highways (PATH) program at the University of California, Berkeley, has carefully calculated these ratios by taking into account such factors as the reduction in motorist delays attributable to the quick clearance of incidents by the FSP. The double-digit benefit-to-cost ratios are derived by dividing these and other savings by program costs.

So what is the economic outlook for the FSP? While no one has a crystal ball with which to predict the future, the hope is that the current 10 programs will be able to continue to increase the productivity of the service they provide while trying to contain escalating costs. It also is hoped that policymakers will recognize that the rapidly growing congestion in our major metropolitan areas is most cost-effectively mitigated by FSP operations, and will find a way to increase funding for this highly successful program.

Quarterly Awards For October Through December 2003

by Réka Goode,
MTC Public Information

BEAT OF THE QUARTER

Only 18 months after winning its first Beat of the Quarter award, **Beat 26** has garnered its second honor: being named Beat of the Quarter for the fourth quarter of 2003.

Responsibility for patrolling the busy Interstate 580 route between Oakland and San Lorenzo was assumed by A-One Towing in July 2003. Owned by Tony Singh, the company has been in business since 1995 and has offices in Berkeley, El Sobrante and Richmond. The firm provides FSP service with both a tow truck and a flatbed truck.

The two Beat 26 drivers — **Louis Z. Ray** and **Biswanath Halder** — split the 14-plus-mile route between them, and back each other up as needed.

A 40-year veteran tow truck driver, Ray said he finds the beat challenging. “We tend to get a lot of accidents occurring in the same locations,” he said, in part because of some difficult-to-navigate on- and off-ramps. But, he commented, he enjoys helping people and being able to tell them “You don’t owe me anything.”

Halder, the other Beat 26 driver, has been a tow truck driver for only about four years, but he has had a lot of varied FSP experience in that time,



The two Beat 26 drivers: Louis Ray (left) and Biswanath Halder

having driven four other beats for another FSP contractor before taking on Beat 26. Named Driver of the Year in 2003, Halder noted that all of the beats he’s worked on have kept him very busy. Making his current assignment somewhat easier is the fact that he’s had time to become familiar with all of the beat’s ins and outs, which means that he knows what to expect day to day.

DRIVER OF THE QUARTER



Danyane Potts, CHP

Shawn Gilgo

Shawn Gilgo, employed by Campbell’s Towing of San Jose, admits that at first, being an FSP driver was a bit intimidating. “Most times,

you’re the first person on the scene of an accident, and you may have to shut down lanes and such,” he noted. “You have to have a good head on your shoulders to handle the work.”

Driver of the Quarter for the fourth quarter of 2003, Gilgo has been a tow truck driver for only two years, but he said he enjoys dealing with the often hazardous tasks he has to undertake as part of patrolling Beat 19 in the South Bay. Two of the intersections along the beat (which encompasses Interstate 880 and Highways 17 and 237) were named by television’s Channel 2 news as among the top five crash sites in the Bay Area, Gilgo said.

Gilgo has helped right rollovers, recovered vehicles that have gone off the road, and assisted the California Highway Patrol (CHP) at major accidents involving several vehicles. Referring to the CHP officers he’s worked with, he commented, “They’re good guys. They keep an eye out for the FSP drivers.”

Of the FSP program itself, Gilgo said, “It’s a great program. It really cuts down on the traffic. And the FSP guys do an awesome job.” Having briefly been involved in commercial towing, he much prefers the FSP, saying “The FSP is more fun. It’s exciting.”

Upcoming Events

Technical Advisory Committee Meetings

8:30 a.m., Tuesdays

MTC MetroCenter

May 11

July 13

1999 Harrison St., Oakland,
17th Floor

June 8

Tow Contractors’ Meetings

11 a.m., Tuesdays

MTC MetroCenter

May 11

July 13

FSP Awards Event Planning Meetings

12 noon, Tuesdays

MTC MetroCenter

May 11

July 13

Quarterly Driver Refresher Training

11 a.m.–1 p.m.

CHP, Oakland

Aug. 5 & 6

CHP, Dublin

May 27 & 28

Aug. 11 & 12

Proficiency Testing

7 a.m.–4 p.m.

CHP, Vallejo

July 12

Certification Classes

7 a.m.–4 p.m.

CHP, Vallejo

July 21–23

**11th Annual
FSP Awards Event
will be held**


September 2004


**Stay tuned for more details
as plans develop**


The Public Speaks

Motorists continue to mail, e-mail and phone in praise and descriptions of their experiences with the FSP program. Here are a few recent comments.


Voicemail

 (01/08/04) "I live up in Napa, and I was on a road trip yesterday when I ran out of gas. I just wanted to call to say that you guys were so helpful and amazing. I cannot find the words to tell you how relieved [I was] and [how] wonderful it was to have someone just all of a sudden come up and save me. The guy that came to save me was Ronnie Gonzales, and I just wanted to give him a big thank you."

 (01/27/04) "On January 21st, my sister and I were driving to the airport, when we got a flat tire. A gentleman with your service named Lewis came to our rescue. He was just an angel. He fixed our tire within 10 minutes and got us on our way. I just wanted to call and say thank you for having this Freeway Service Patrol program available for us."

 (02/19/04) "I just had one of your drivers stop to assist me. The gentleman was very helpful. My car had overheated, and it was almost totally out of water. It could have cost me an engine. He was so helpful. I wanted to buy him lunch, but he would not accept it. He provided very good service for me, and it saved me a lot of money. I am very grateful. His name is [Viera] Martir. Thank you."


Letters

 (12/4/03) "I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Freeway Service Patrol and in particular, R. Banaban, for coming to my aid this morning after [I] suffered a nasty flat tire on my way to work."


Less than 10 minutes after the incident, Mr. Banaban pulled up behind me in his tow truck. He was quick, efficient and very friendly in helping me out, locating the underbody spare on my truck and installing it in a fraction of the time I could've done it myself. I was on my way again so quickly


that I made it to work on time!

It's nice to directly benefit in some way from the taxes we pay for these services. The Freeway Service Patrol and Mr. Banaban are doing a great job of helping keep our freeways safe and efficient."

 (12/05/03) "I was stuck on the side of the freeway on December 4, 2003, with a flat tire. I was there only 6-8 minutes before a tow truck pulled up. A very nice and polite man helped change my tire and made sure me and my son were O.K. and watched us merge back into traffic. I have never come across such a helpful, courteous and caring person. I thank you."

E-mail

 (03/31/04) "Thank you, Bill Jauregui, for being so helpful when we had the breakdown with our recreational vehicle on Highway 101 in Millbrae this afternoon. Being tourists from Germany, we were very desperate when the RV we had just taken over from a rental business in San Leandro lost one of its wheels, but your appearance and your kind words and the use of your cellular phone helped us to master this bad situation. The Freeway Service Patrol seems to be an excellent institution."

 (04/06/04) "This morning I found myself in a very difficult situation, having my car suddenly without power and disabled at the end of the northbound Highway 101 ramp at Cochrane in Morgan Hill. Almost immediately after putting my hazard lights on, I looked up and saw a service vehicle. I was greeted with a friendly smile and an introduction to the Freeway Service Patrol employee, Ronnie Gonzalez. My co-worker and I were in a very dangerous spot in a narrow shoulder lane with traffic flying past us on 101."

Ronnie Gonzalez quickly explained what the FSP was all about and that he would do whatever was necessary to get us safely off the freeway.

I would like to commend this wonderful program. I would like to vote for Mr. Gonzalez as employee of the year! His care, reassurance and big smile were above and beyond his duties. Thank you very much for this terrific service."

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Joseph P. Bort MetroCenter
101 Eighth Street
Oakland, CA 94607-4700
510.464.7700
TDD/TTY 510.464.7769
FAX 510.464.7848
Web site <www.mtc.ca.gov>

MTC

Executive Director: Steve Heminger
Deputy Directors:
Therese McMillan & Ann Flemer
Manager, Bridge & Highway Operations:
Rod McMillan
MTC SAFE Program Manager: Wes Wells
MTC SAFE Senior Program Coordinator:
Jaime C. Maldonado

On Patrol Editor:

Radiah Taylor Victor 510.817.3209

Copy Editor:

Réka Goode

Graphics

Supervisor: Brenda Kahn
Design/Production: Peter Beeler
Photos (unless otherwise indicated):
Radiah Taylor Victor
Printing: Autumn Press

California Highway Patrol, Golden Gate Division

Chief Tom Noble; Captain Kelly Young;
Lieutenant Amy Mangan; Sergeant Jim Castano (707.551.4131); Officers Jessie Martinez, Steve Barruel, Gary Lee and Chris Nave; Staff Service Analyst Dwyane Potts

Caltrans, District 4

District Director: Bijan Sartipi
District Director of Operations: Albert Yee
Office Chief: Cyrus Mashhoodi

Caltrans FSP Staff:

Norman Anderson, Scotty Hsiao,
Kane Wong (510.286.5917)

Santa Cruz Regional Transportation Commission

Luis Mendez 831.460.3212

Local Tow Contractors:

Tony Singh
A-One Towing, El Sobrante
Charlie Scharff
All Bay Cities Towing, Concord
Richard Bilafer
B & A Body Works and Towing,
San Francisco
Bryan Davis and Richard Valles
B & D Towing, Concord
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